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Keeping the Outsiders Out: Civil Rights, The "Non-Issue" of the 1992 Presidential Election

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Overview

Civil rights, an issue that critically aided the Reagan-Bush elections of the 1980's, practically disappeared from the presidential election issue agenda of 1992. This would appear to be a remarkable occurrence, given the importance of this issue to Republican presidential electoral hopes during the past two decades and that a major urban riot, dominated by black participants, occurred during the 1992 presidential election year. This paper examines why and how civil rights became a "non-issue," i.e., an issue not perceived as part of the political agenda, during the 1992 presidential campaign. The emphasis is on the strategy of the Democratic presidential nominee, Bill Clinton, and how he sought to mute the civil rights issue during the 1992 presidential campaign.

In recent decades civil rights issues created a critical wedge between major elements of the traditional New Deal Democratic coalition. This wedge, between African-Americans and working-class whites, substantially contributed to the Republican presidential election victories of the previous decade. Many analysts and political strategists believed that the GOP, with the help of Democratic defectors, had forged a new and possibly durable winning presidential electoral coalition. Therefore, this paper also looks at how President George Bush backed away from the civil rights issue during the campaign on 1992.

Introduction

Politicians are preoccupied with creating and maintaining winning political coalitions. It is the winning coalition that gets to hold office and office is the key to political power.¹ But electoral coalitions

¹The seminal monograph in this area, from which there has flowed an outpouring of contemporary work on coalition theory and coalition building, is William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1963).

change over time, as they are inherently unstable.² V. O. Key, Jr.'s seminal work on political alignments has served as the major framework for the analysis of electoral coalition change and development.³ Key modified and extended his argument on the nature of critical elections and changes in electoral coalition alignments, as have other scholars. But the fact that political change is, as Key noted, the result of election processes that "operate inexorably ... election after election to form new party alignments and to build new party groupings," remains central to an understanding of democratic politics.⁴

E. E. Schattschneider added to Key's analysis by pointing out that periods of realignment occur not only with a change in party composition, but also with a transformation of "the agenda of American politics." That is, the current issue battle lines are replaced with new issues and new party battle lines about these issues.⁵ Politicians often operate as entrepreneurs who create or recreate issues to attract votes.⁶ It is usually through the vehicle of elections that politicians operate as issue entrepreneurs. Politicians use issues to garner votes. As Anthony Downs succinctly stated the case: "parties formulate policies in order to win elections...."⁷ Elections therefore provide a periodicity to changes in the public policy agenda; they serve as a focus for politicians to bring forward issues as they seek to attract the votes necessary to win office.⁸

²William H. Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism* (San Francisco, Ca.: Freeman, 1982), p. 209.

³V. O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (1959): 13-18.

⁴V. O. Key, Jr., "Secular Realignment and the Party System," *Journal of Politics* 21 (1959): 198-210. The literature on political realignment appears to be ever-developing. A few of the more prominent studies in this area include: Byron E. Shafer, ed., *The End of Realignment?* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, (rev. ed.; Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1983); Everett Carl Ladd, Jr. with Charles Hadley, *Transformation of the Party System* (2nd ed.; New York: Norton, 1978); John R. Petrocik, *Party Coalitions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections* (New York: Norton, 1970).

⁵E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (Hinsdale, Ill.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960, 1976), p. 88.

⁶John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), pp. 129-30; Nelson W. Polsby, *Political Innovation in America* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 161; Jack L. Walker, "Performance Gaps, Policy Research, and Political Entrepreneurs," *Policy Studies Journal* 3 (1974): 112-116.

⁷Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 28.

⁸Polsby, pp. 165-74.

Of course, the public must respond to the politicians' entreaties for change, if change is to take place. James L. Sundquist points out that a necessary condition for political realignment to take place is that the electorate must polarize itself on an issue and politicians must publicly contest the issue and maintain visibly differing polar positions.⁹ The heart of politics in democracies, according to Schattschneider, rests on these assumptions and the assumption that the majority party will operate to implement its policy pledges once it is in office. He writes: "Democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process...."¹⁰

However, important issues may well be ignored in public debate, or defined out of the political arena. When this occurs, the weakest groups and individuals in society are often the losers. To Schattschneider, the "socialization of conflict," the placement of issues on the public policy debate agenda, is a critical element in politics, especially for those who are already among the weakest members of society. They typically want to involve more people in an issue debate, to tip the odds and move the balance of forces toward their position on the issue.¹¹

The New Deal realignment was built around the highly vocal and visible opposition of the monied, conservative economic interests against the Democratic party's commitment to the disadvantaged and generally weaker elements of American society. The New Deal coalition, the alliance that was forged by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the wake of the 1932 presidential election, established the Democratic party as the national majority party. The New Deal coalition has been so durable that it has become part of American folklore, and it is so well known that its constituent groupings--Catholics, Jews, union members, big-city populations, poor people, and African-Americans--are broadly familiar to the mass public. Yet this coalition has undergone changes. The most notable shifts have been the defection of the white South and, more recently, non-southern working class whites from the Democratic alliance, and the emergence of the black southerner within the alliance.

There is little doubt that in the 1960's both the partisan coalitions and the issues on which electoral outcomes had depended since the 1930's shifted dramatically. There is solid evidence that the 1964 presidential election served as a critical event for this occurrence, and

⁹Sundquist, p. 14.

¹⁰Schattschneider, p. 141.

¹¹Schattschneider, 7, 40. An extension of this argument is made in Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytic Framework," *American Political Science Review*, 57 (1957): 632-42.

that divisions over the pace, breadth and depth of governmental action in civil rights was a major cause of this shift.¹² The New Deal coalition was built around the subordination of ethnic, regional and other differences to a class-based alliance. Carmines and Stimson's perceptive analysis of electoral alignment in the wake of the 1964 presidential election demonstrates that racial issues are now generally subordinate to class issues in defining political realities for the mass public. They find that "racial issues, in sum, seem not only to be at the core of the [recent] increase in mass issue consistency but also to provide a significant and stable element in the meaning of liberal/conservative political beliefs."¹³ Since 1968, Gerald Pomper finds, "all partisan groups recognized the existence of different party positions on this [racial] issue and all were convinced that the Democrats favor greater government action on civil rights than do the Republicans."¹⁴ The consequences of these changes in public attitudes were not only noted by the Republicans but acted upon.

Kevin Phillips, a Nixon aide in the 1968 campaign, argued in *The Emerging Republican Majority* that the GOP had to redefine the race issue, from civil rights for blacks to misuse of funds and government efforts on behalf of wasteful economic programs and morally incorrect social policies. This would turn the race issue around and drive lower-class whites, Catholics, and others out of the party of Roosevelt and into the Republican fold.¹⁵ Phillips and other GOP strategists who subsequently took this position never argued that they were for racial discrimination or against blacks being treated equally. Instead they claimed they were for equal treatment of all Americans and for "good" values. They were against reverse discrimination, the coddling of criminals, the acceptance or encouragement of out-of-wedlock births and welfare dependency. In 1982, Phillips wrote of a "New Right" of "populist-conservative groups emphasizing social issues, religious and cultural alienation, anti-elite rhetoric, lower-middle-class constituencies, populist fund-raising and plebiscitary opinion mobilization." This New Right sees itself as an inheritor of George Wallace's supporters, without any link to the racism that he espoused in the 1960's.¹⁶

¹²Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Robert Huckfeldt and Carol Weitzel Kohfeld, *Race and the Decline of Class in American Politics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

¹³Carmines and Stimson, p. 134.

¹⁴Gerald M. Pomper, "Toward A Responsible Two-Party System: What, Again?" *Journal of Politics* 33 (1971): 932.

¹⁵Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: 1969).

¹⁶Kevin P. Phillips, *Post-Conservative America* (New York: Random House, 1982), pp. 47-49.

In the 1980's Phillips' program of action was put into place as Ronald Reagan and the New Right gained control of the presidential wing of the Republican party. The Reagan 1980 and 1984 election strategies and the Bush 1988 election strategy were consistent with Phillips' plan and carried the day for the GOP. In the current era of American politics, Huckfeldt and Kohfeld argue, "race frequently serves as a wedge that disrupts lower-class [black and white] coalitions, thereby driving out class in our political arrangements." And, "race continues to be the most important line of conflict in American electoral politics."¹⁷ This wedge was basic to the emergence of Republican presidential majorities during the 1980's.

Edsall and Edsall's 1991 study of the Reagan electoral strategy finds that "race has fueled the ascendancy of the presidential wing of the Republican party and has blocked Democratic efforts to revive a majority coalition."¹⁸ In recent presidential elections, the more Democratic party identifiers perceived that the GOP was opposed to aid to minorities, the more likely they were to defect to the Republican candidate. The Democratic party was consistently perceived as supportive of such aid, and this was opposed by many of their core partisan supporters.¹⁹ In every state-wide 1990 election in which the GOP made race a factor--through the use of the term "quotas" or the linkage of a candidate to Jesse Jackson, who is perceived as an aggressive and overt defender of racial preferences for African-Americans--the Republican candidate emerged the winner.²⁰

The Edsalls' study of the contemporary political party battle concludes, "race will remain an exceptionally divisive force in politics as long as the debate is couched in covert language and in coded symbols." This divisiveness advantages the Republicans who continue to oppose programs centered on minority preferences while the Democrats support such programs.²¹ However, Herbert Asher argues, "for preferential treatment [of minorities] to become a critical issue, the Democratic party and its candidates would have to advocate a set of measures that are seen as favoring minorities at the expense of whites...."²²

Both the Republicans and the Democrats pulled back from their

¹⁷Huckfeldt and Kohfeld, pp. ix, 1.

¹⁸Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 256.

¹⁹Robert Weissberg, "The Democratic Party and the Conflict Over Racial Policy," in Benjamin Ginsberg and Alan Stone, eds., *Do Elections Matter?* (2nd ed.; Armonk, N.Y.: Sharpe, 1991), p. 162.

²⁰Edsall and Edsall, p. 257.

²¹Edsall and Edsall, pp. 281, 257, 186.

²²Herbert B. Asher, *Presidential Elections and American Politics* (5th ed.; Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992), 325-326.

respective positions on major civil rights legislation as the 1992 presidential election approached.²³ Yet, just prior to the presidential election year it appeared that both major parties were going to harden their polar positions on this issue. In 1990 President Bush vetoed a proposed Civil Rights Act after denouncing it as a "quotas" bill. His veto was upheld with the overwhelming support of the GOP congressional delegation. In 1991, after ten months of bitter partisan debate, the Congress, with the President's blessing, passed a new Civil Rights Act--with large majorities of both parties supporting the legislation. The near-election of David Duke, the former Nazi turned Republican, to the governorship of Louisiana changed the political atmosphere. A major public outcry over Duke's association with the GOP convinced many moderate Republicans that the party had gone too far in its anti-civil rights advocacy.

Several key Republican Senators, led by John Warner of Virginia, told the President that they might lose their reelection campaigns if moderate whites in their states defected from the GOP because the party was advocating a civil rights position that was too strident. The Duke-GOP connection symbolized a radicalism that was unacceptable to many Americans. President Bush was warned that several Republican senators up for reelection in 1992 would have to vote for the Democratic version of the legislation if he could not work out a compromise. Subsequently, after extensive debate within the White House, the President agreed that he could revise his position and a new compromise on this bill could be negotiated. He agreed to a bipartisan interpretive memorandum that waffled on the meaning of the affirmative action sections of the proposal.

The GOP gamble on polarizing the electorate over race was suspended. On the Democratic side, the original 1990 bill was weakened with language which specifically forbade the use of quotas. In addition, a lower limit was placed on awards possible for punitive damages when intent to discriminate was not proven. Thus both the GOP's and the Democrats' hard-line positions on this issue were muted. Partisan differences over civil rights were no longer as clear as they had been.

The 1992 Election and Civil Rights

For Bill Clinton and his allies, civil rights, the issue that had devastated the Roosevelt coalition in recent years, was to be side-

²³An analysis of the inter-party and intra-party Republican struggle over the proposed 1990 civil rights legislation and the 1991 civil rights proposals that became law is provided in: Mark Stern, "Party Alignments and Civil Rights, Then and Now," Paper presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

stepped in their drive for the presidency. As he sought the Democratic presidential nomination, and then as he campaigned as the party's nominee, the symbols and associations of civil rights advocacy moved to the background of Clinton's campaign panoply. Civil rights was not to be a Clinton campaign issue.

Contact with Jesse Jackson, the leading national civil rights proponent of the day, was perceived as hazardous by the Clinton election team. Association with Jackson was seen as strong civil rights advocacy. Throughout the 1992 election season, therefore, the Clinton campaign team kept Jackson as far away from its candidate as possible.

In June, Clinton publicly detached himself from the Reverend Jesse Jackson's apparent support of extreme black nationalism when he, Clinton, condemned rap singer Sister Souljah's statement, "why not have a week to kill white people," at a meeting of the Jackson-led Rainbow Coalition. Sister Souljah had been invited to speak at the meeting the night before Clinton addressed the group, and Jesse Jackson sat in attendance as Clinton proceeded to attack his guest. Jackson was outraged and denounced Clinton's coming to the coalition meeting to "stage a well planned sneak attack, without the courage to confront but with a calculation to embarrass." Clinton's "Machiavellian maneuver," Jackson complained, "[was intended] purely to appeal to conservative whites by containing Jackson and isolating Jackson."²⁴ But as a "Political Memo" column in the *New York Times* noted, "with his criticism of comments by Sister Souljah... [Clinton] accomplished much for his campaign. He... distanced himself from the Rev. Jesse Jackson and spoke out only against reverse racism." The Governor argued he was "absolutely not" playing to racial intolerance with his remarks about Sister Souljah. "I grew up in a segregated society," he rejoined, "and I have devoted my public life to trying to overcome feelings of prejudice."²⁵

Despite the lack of support for the Arkansas Governor by Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition, Clinton was generally perceived by liberal opinion-leaders as the Democratic advocate of civil rights.²⁶ He couched his primary election appeal in terms of broad economic justice, employment, and getting the country to work. William Julius Wilson wrote in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Clinton has destroyed the myth that blacks will only respond if a candidate highlights race-specific issues and programs." Wilson argued that Clinton's general appeals of the need to help poor people and the need to get health coverage for all "has allowed blacks ... to identify with a candidate who addresses them

²⁴*New York Times*, June 14, June 17, June 19, 1992.

²⁵Gwen Ifill, "Clinton Deftly Navigates Shoals of Racial Issues," *New York Times*, June 17, 1992, p. 22.

²⁶"Candidates Court Jackson Supporters," *New York Times*, January 26, 1992.

without narrowly focusing his message on race."²⁷ While Clinton's message appealed to middle-of-the-road whites--and, as Jackson suggested, perhaps some Reagan Democrats--the Arkansas Governor held his base of support among black Democratic voters. He received 70 percent of all black votes cast in the Democratic primary elections while also holding on to 47 percent of the white Democratic primary votes. He was a "new kind of Democrat" and getting tangled up in debates about civil rights issues was not on his new Democratic agenda.

When riots broke out in Los Angeles on May 1, 1992, after the "not guilty" finding in the Rodney King case, President Bush's response was initially muted. In a nationwide television address he spoke of the steps he was taking to restore order and expressed concern at "the brutality of [the] mob, pure and simple." He talked of his own lack of understanding of the verdict, but that it had to be respected as part of the justice process. "There's a difference," he argued, "between frustration with the law and direct assaults upon our legal system. In a civilized society, there can be no excuse ... [for the actions] that have terrorized the law abiding citizens of Los Angeles."²⁸

Candidate Clinton's response to the Los Angeles riot was also initially muted, and evolved over a period of days. He first expressed sympathy and understanding for the rioters, as well as criticism that President Bush's "absence of action" on urban issues had fostered the situation that led to the rioting. But, the day after the rioting began the Governor also criticized the rioters as "lawless vandals."²⁹ The Governor renewed his attack on the administration after White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater spoke of the riot being a result of the social welfare programs created by the Democrats in the 1960's and 1970's. Clinton scathingly attacked "twelve years of denial and neglect" of urban problems by the Reagan/Bush administrations.³⁰ On May 6, two days after Clinton's attack, the President toured the ravaged area and spoke of being "embarrassed by interracial violence and prejudice." He spoke of his own "sense of shame and sorrow at the destruction and horror of the events." He spoke of things being different in the future.³¹ Thereafter, until late in the general election campaign, both candidates publicly down-played the Los Angeles riot and the issues it

²⁷William Julius Wilson, "The Right Message," *New York Times*, March 17, 1992.

²⁸"Excerpts From Bush's Speech on Los Angeles Riots: 'Need to Restore Order,'" *New York Times*, May 2, 1992, p. 8.

²⁹Gwen Ifill, "Clinton's Reaction to Rioters Evolves," *New York Times*, May 2, 1992, p. 9.

³⁰Robert Pear, "Clinton Assails G.O.P. 'Neglect' as Riots' Cause," May 6, 1992, 1, 26.

³¹Andrew Rosenthal, "Bush Finds 'Horror' on Los Angeles Tour," *New York Times*, May 8, 1992, p. 1, 18.

brought forth.

The 1992 Democratic National Convention was a love-in, with only minor words of dissent spoken by Jerry Brown, the last hold-out Democratic challenger to Mr. Clinton. Unlike the previous two Democratic conventions there were no bitter rules fights. The 1984 and 1988 rules fights were waged "over how much leverage a black candidate, Jesse Jackson, would carry into the convention."³² In 1992 Jackson took himself out of the running for the presidency, and despite the vocal insistence by both him and his supporters, he was not seriously considered as a finalist for the vice-presidential slot on the Democratic ticket. Jackson spoke softly at the convention, and he told reporters that his role in the campaign had yet to be worked out. After the convention, the black leader commented: "There was this strategy [by Clinton] of distancing from labor, from cities and from the Rainbow. Distance is an innovative way of building a coalition. For Clinton to win a general election the strategy must be inclusive."

That inclusiveness, as Jackson understood it, meant a major campaign role for himself and the Rainbow.³³ Jackson would campaign across the country to get out the Democratic vote, and occasionally speak to Clinton on the telephone, but throughout the general election season Clinton maintained his public distance from Jackson.³⁴ At the September 9 annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention, Mr. Jackson, according to the *New York Times*, "sat stony behind Mr. Clinton as the Arkansas Governor received a warm reception from the religious group." Prior to the meeting stories had circulated that the two leaders were going to publicly get together and talk about the campaign, but what ensued was far from a public talk. The *Times* reported, "Mr. Jackson met Mr. Clinton briefly in a backstage restroom while more than a dozen clergymen milled around outside and guarded the doorway. Mr. Jackson said later that Mr. Clinton agreed to meet with him next week to discuss voter registration."³⁵ That meeting never occurred.³⁶ Jackson had his public meeting with President-elect

³²Edsall and Edsall, p. 264.

³³"Jackson Waits for Plan From Clinton," *New York Times*, July 18, 1992, p.1, 9.

³⁴"On Sidelines of Presidential Race, Jackson Turns to Local Campaigns," *New York Times*, July 26, 1992, p. 1; "Mississippi Trip Offers Jackson a Role," *New York Times*, July 28, 1992, p. 1; "Jackson to Join Democratic Drive," *New York Times*, September 4, 1992, p. 1.

³⁵*New York Times*, September 10, 1992.

³⁶On the Phil Donahue television show Clinton received criticism for not meeting with Jackson, but he responded, "I don't think you can judge me just on how many meetings I've had with Reverend Jackson." He indicated that he did speak with Jackson on the telephone. See: "Clinton and Gore Return to the 'Call-In,'" *New York Times*, October 7, 1992.

Clinton at the Governor's mansion in Little Rock on November 23, 1992.

The Clinton-Gore team played to the broad middle-class in its convention presentation and the campaign that followed. The convention film introduced the Democratic presidential nominee with an emphasis on his southern, relatively lower middle-class family, his hard-working mother, and his grit and determination to succeed. The nominee's acceptance speech noted: "In the name of those who do the work, pay the taxes, raise the kids, and play by the rules--in the name of the hard working who make up our forgotten middle class--I proudly accept your nomination." He reminded his audience, "I am a product of the middle class."³⁷

On the last day of the convention, Ronald H. Brown, the publicly quiet, well-dressed, and now powerful chair of the Democratic National Committee, received three standing ovations from the party's leaders. Brown had been a top Jackson adviser in 1988, but had helped dissuade him from going for the presidency in 1992. He had also helped persuade New York Governor Mario Cuomo, whose appeal to big city white ethnics was unassailable, to make the nominating speech for Governor Clinton.³⁸ Brown's behind-the-scenes maneuvering had been instrumental in staging a harmonious Democratic National Convention--unknown in recent years--and in unifying support for the party's standard bearer.. Brown was an African-American who understood and succored the Clinton presidential strategy, and he now appeared consistently at stage center in the Democratic campaign of 1992. He was the kind of African-American Democrat that the Clinton campaign wanted the nation to see: a moderate, articulate, visible link to big-city Democrats and their African-American allies.

On July 16, the last day of the Democratic convention, Ross Perot announced his withdrawal from the presidential race. The immediate beneficiary of this move was Bill Clinton. What had looked in June to be a close, three-way race for the presidency became, according to many immediate post-convention polls, a near-certain victory for Clinton. Clinton was now ahead of Bush by a 55 percent to 31 percent margin. The post-convention boost that came to most new presidential nominees was magnified for Clinton by the movement of Perot backers into his camp over Bush by a 45 percent to 25 percent margin.³⁹ Paul Tully, political director of the Democratic National Committee, remarked, "Perot's disappearance freed up a set of voters who are the

³⁷"Democratic Convention Acceptance Speech," *New York Times*, July 17, 1992, pp. 1, 10.

³⁸"Ronald H. Brown Emerges as a Major Force," *New York Times*, July 20, 1992, p. 1.

³⁹R. W. Apple, Jr., "Poll Gives Clinton a Post-Perot, Post-Convention Boost," *New York Times*, July 18, 1992, p. 1.

angriest and most anti-Bush."⁴⁰

The Clinton-Gore team was taking no chances with their new cushion of support. Several days after the convention ended they embarked on an eight-state bus tour of mostly small-town America. In a major Texas speech the Democratic presidential contender stated, "Four years ago this crime issue was used to divide America. I want to be tough on crime and good for civil rights. You can't have civil justice without order and safety."⁴¹ Clinton's signing of death warrants as Governor of Arkansas had aroused antagonism among many liberal leaders, but it lent credibility to his call for being tough on crime. The middle-class remained in focus for him. The Democratic nominee's general election strategy was clear-cut, and expressed succinctly in a sign at his Little Rock headquarters: "Change vs. more of the same. The economy, stupid. Don't forget health care."⁴²

The Republican National Convention of 1992 reflected the disarray and antagonisms which pervaded Bush's reelection campaign from its start. It also reflected what appeared to be the President's hesitancy to enter the campaign fray. The first two days of the convention were turned over to the radical right. Their members, led by Pat Buchanan on prime time television, spewed forth ideological anger, disdain for cultural diversity, an absolutist anti-abortion position, and a fundamentalist vision of morality. The speeches had not been cleared by the White House.⁴³

The GOP platform was as extreme as the Democratic party platform was moderate.⁴⁴ The media and public reaction to this outpouring of rancor was incredulity and dismay. The President's forces regained control by the third day of the convention. Bush's acceptance speech was a paean to his foreign policy leadership, a call for family and traditional values, and a plea to judge each candidate on the basis of his character. On civil rights, which Clinton had passed over with

⁴⁰"Polls Seem to Offer Respite, But Clinton Pushes Pace," *New York Times* July 26, 1992, p.22.

⁴¹"Clinton in Houston Speech Assails Bush on Crime Issue," *New York Times*, July 24, 1992, p. 13. See also: *New York Times*, July 21, 1992, p. 1.

⁴²Michael Kelly, "Democrat Fights Perceptions of Bush Gains," *New York Times*, October 31, 1992, 1.

⁴³See, for example, the following: Ross K. Baker, "The Presidential Nominations," in Gerald M. Pomper, et al., *The Election of 1992* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1993), pp. 65-68; Ryan J. Barilleaux and Randall E. Adkins, "The Nominations: Process and Patterns," in Michael Nelson, ed., *The Elections of 1992* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1993), pp. 52-54; Paul J. Quirk and John K. Dalager, "The Election: A 'New Democrat,'" in Nelson, ed., pp. 69-70; and, *New York Times*, August 13-21, 1992.

⁴⁴*New York Times*, August 13, 15, 18, 1992.

quick broad strokes of support, Bush's words were also few: "we strengthened our civil rights laws, and we did it without resorting to quotas."⁴⁵ In 1988 the "Willie Horton" ad captured the public's attention with its implicit interweaving of liberalism, crime, civil rights advocacy and race. In 1992 the Bush campaign retreated from its aggressive anti-affirmative action and anti-quotas position. The President repeated, time after time, that he supported civil rights and he supported the compromise employment bill, "without quotas," that he had signed into law.

Ross Perot's reentry into the campaign on October 1 helped to narrow Clinton's lead in the polls and raised concerns that neither major-party candidate would secure an electoral college majority. However, Perot's return did not appear to substantially alter the issue positions of the major-party nominees.

The only time civil rights was again brought up in a forthright manner was during the presidential debates. In the October 11 debate the candidates were asked about "racial division Why is this still happening in America and what would you do to end it?" None of the respondents mentioned any specific proposals. Perot responded that "during political campaigns I would urge everybody to stop trying to split this country into fragments and appeal to the differences between us.... We ought to love one another because united teams win and divided teams lose." He never moved afar from this approach. Clinton emphasized his growing up in the South and his having seen "the winds of hatred divide people and keep the people of my state poorer than they would have been, both spiritually and economically." He continued in a vague and non-committal tone for the remainder of his response. Bush answered: "I've tried to use the White House as the bully pulpit, speaking out against discrimination. We've passed two very forward-looking civil rights bills. [Bush referred to the Americans with Disabilities Act as a civil rights bill.] It's not going to be all done by legislation...."⁴⁶

At the second debate the candidates were asked, "when do you estimate your party will both nominate and elect an Afro-American and female ticket to the Presidency of the United States?" This was the only civil-rights-related question asked during this debate. All three candidates answered rather innocuously. George Bush's initial response, "I think if Barbara Bush were running this year she'd be elected," drew the most laughs and the most attention after the debate ended. No one else responded to the question with any specific proposals.⁴⁷

⁴⁵"Transcript of Bush Speech Accepting the Nomination for Another Four Years," *New York Times*, August 21, 1992, pp. 1, 12.

⁴⁶"Transcript, First Presidential Debate," *New York Times*, October 12, 1992.

⁴⁷*New York Times*, October 16, 1992.

At the third debate the President was asked, "let's move to some of the leadership concerns that have been voiced about you... that you began to focus on the economy, on health care, on racial divisions in this country only after they became crises. Is that a fair criticism?" The President responded that, "I don't think that's a fair shot." He proceeded to respond to the civil rights section of the query by citing his support for "the Americans with Disabilities Act, which I think is one of the foremost pieces of civil rights legislation. And yes, it took me to veto two civil rights quota bills, because I don't believe in quotas, and I don't think the American people believe in quotas." He continued, "I beat the Congress on that, and then we passed a decent civil rights bill that offers guarantees against discrimination in employment and that is good." He never talked about the Los Angeles riots. Perot passed on answering the question. Clinton talked about the economy. He never directly addressed the section of the question which dealt with race relations and crises.⁴⁸ Race relations and civil rights were not issues that these candidates wished to address in the 1992 presidential campaign.

The "Outsiders" and Civil Rights as a "Non-Issue"

When the votes were counted Bill Clinton had been elected President with 43.3 percent of the total votes cast, while George Bush won 37.7 percent and Ross Perot received 19 percent. Clinton won 83 percent of the black vote, and he carried 39 percent of the white vote, while Bush won but 10 percent of the black vote while carrying 40 percent of the white vote.⁴⁹ The aversion of the candidates to deal with the race issue was reflected in the lack of interest that the mass public held for the issue on election day. When asked in the CBS News/*New York Times* exit poll, "Which issues mattered most in deciding how you voted?," less than five percent of the respondents indicated race or civil rights as an answer. By a wide margin, the related issues of the economy and jobs, followed by health care, were most salient. Civil rights or race were not mentioned as one of the top ten concerns.⁵⁰ Personality explained two and a half times more of the variance in the 1988 presidential election outcome than did policy issues. In 1992, policy evaluations explained seven times more of the variance in the outcome than did personality.⁵¹ Thus, while policy was at stage center

⁴⁸*New York Times*, October 20, 1992.

⁴⁹Election results cited here are from the CBS News/*New York Times* Exit Poll as cited in Quirk and Dalager, p. 78. For a brief, but insightful analysis of the social group basis of the vote see: Gerald M. Pomper, "The Presidential Election," in Pomper, et al., pp. 135-140.

⁵⁰Quirk and Dalager, p. 81. See also: Pomper, in Pomper, et al., p. 146.

⁵¹Philip Meyer, "The Media Reformation: Giving the Agenda Back to

in the 1992 elections, civil rights policy was not among the issues that swayed voters. Civil rights had become a "non-issue." It had been effectively kept out of the public issue agenda in the 1992 presidential election campaign.

Bill Clinton understood the damage wrought upon the Democratic coalition by the civil rights issue. He lived in the South and he saw the transformation of the region's politics as whites increasingly deserted the party of Jefferson and Jackson during the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's in response to the primacy of civil rights issues on the campaign agenda. He was determined not to repeat the tactical mistakes of his Democratic predecessors and let race issues divide the party in 1992. He maintained his distance from Jesse Jackson and other aggressive public advocates of civil rights, while assuring black and white voters that he understood their needs. He stayed focused on the economy and he argued that the incumbent president bore the responsibility for its poor condition. That was Clinton's campaign strategy from the outset in 1992 and he carried it out.

Almost every political observer has agreed that the election of 1992 became a referendum on George Bush and his handling of the economy.⁵² Aside from a push for traditional morality and a call for "family values," the Bush campaign did not pursue a New Right strategy in 1992. The President did not seriously attempt to interject race, the most powerfully divisive issue for the Democratic coalition in recent years, into the 1992 campaign. In essence the Clinton forces defined the campaign and the Bush-GOP camp did not retaliate with their most powerful issue: race.

Perhaps the fight over the 1991 Civil Rights Act moved the President away from pursuing this issue any further. Perhaps the death of campaign strategist Lee Atwater left the Bush campaign staff without a combative street-fighter who would do whatever it took to win. Pat Buchanan was more than willing to take the race issue on but he was kept at arm's length from the Bush camp. There was apparently no comparable person available and positioned to do what Atwater had done in 1988. Neither party was willing to take the polar position or pursue serious debate about civil rights and the Democratic nominee was the beneficiary of this default. Thus, civil rights became a "non-issue."

E. E. Schattschneider would perhaps suggest that what may have been good for Bill Clinton and the Democrats may not have been good for the democratic polity or one of its weakest groups, African-

the People," in Nelson, ed., p. 105

⁵²See, e.g.,: R.W. Apple, Jr., "The Economy's Casualty," *New York Times*, November 4, 1992, p.1; Kathleen A. Frankovic, "Public Opinion in the 1992 Campaign," in Pomper, et al., p. 130; Thomas Edsall, "Bloc Busting: The Demise of the GOP Quest for a Majority," *Washington Post National Weekly*, October, 1992, 19-25.

Americans. Democratic politics, to Schattschneider, is about the socialization of conflict, the organizing into the public sphere of the private battles that have kept the less-well-off in their place. He notes, "every change in the scope of conflict has a bias; it is partisan in its nature."⁵³ In this case, the bias mitigated against public discussion of a crucial issue. Of course, it may well be that over the long run, as Clinton's allies argue and Edsall and Edsall imply, the muting of civil rights in the 1992 presidential campaign may redound to the benefit of those individuals who would normally want to play it out in the open political arena. Without the silencing of civil rights, the Clinton forces assert, they may well not have won the presidency and be in a position to use their powers in support of the issue. Yet this administration backed away from its first major thrust in the area, the nomination of Lani Guinier, a strong and controversial civil rights advocate, as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights.⁵⁴ After a year in office, the administration had yet to name another nominee for the position. The "outsiders" were silenced during the campaign and their voice has yet to emerge with major effect within this administration.

⁵³Schattschneider, p. 4.

⁵⁴On the Guinier nomination fiasco see: *New York Times*, June 3, 4, 1993.